



Focus on General Permits

from Ecology's Water Quality Program

General permits: a way to provide efficient and effective permitting of wastewater discharges

What is an NPDES permit?

In 1972, Congress enacted the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) system as part of the Clean Water Act. The NPDES system requires that everyone who discharges into the water get a discharge permit. These permits are designed to assure that discharges are properly managed to avoid environmental harm and protect water quality. The permit describes what the discharger must do to protect the water and what types of monitoring and reporting the discharger must perform, and limits the pollutants that can be discharged.

Originally, the NPDES program included only "individual" permits. The individual permit is written for a specific discharge at a specific location. The individual permit is highly tailored to regulate the pollutants in the discharge. This can be a very time-consuming process for both the permit holder and for the Department of Ecology (Ecology).

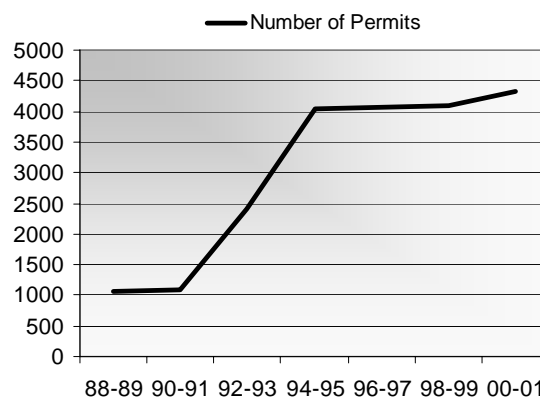
In 1979, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) created a class of permits called "general" permits. Washington state was authorized by EPA to use the general permit approach in September 1989. In 1990, the Clean Water Act was amended to require permits for stormwater discharges. General permits were viewed as the only practical way to deal with the large number of facilities that would require a stormwater permit.

Individual permits versus general permits

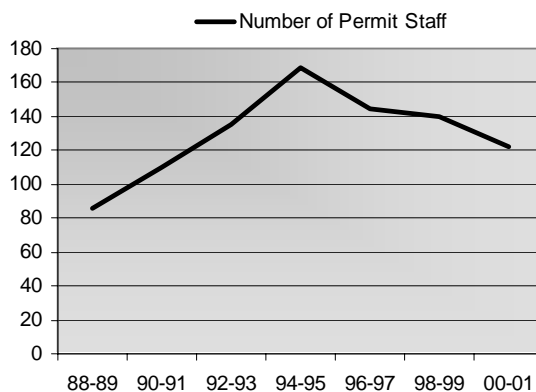
The general permit approach produces a permit for a group of similar dischargers at diverse locations. It will typically take about a year to write a general permit, but, once it is issued, many facilities can be covered under a single general permit quickly and efficiently. A general permit is appropriate when the characteristics of the discharge are similar and a standard set of permit requirements can effectively provide environmental protection. To develop a general permit, Ecology collects information about typical pollutants and discharge conditions from the targeted group and sets permit requirements to regulate this generalized set of pollutants and discharges.

There are currently about 3,600 permittees under general permits (GP).

Industrial Stormwater GP	1168
Construction Stormwater GP	921
Sand & Gravel GP	938
Fruit Packers GP	199
Boat Yards GP	103
Hatcheries GP	84
Water Treatment Plant GP	30
Aquatic Pesticides GP	65
Dairies GP	109



Washington state issued its first general permit, the fish hatchery general permit, in 1990. At that time there were about 1,000 individual permits. The overall backlog rate was approximately 55 percent. Since that time, the number of individual permits has remained relatively constant at around 800, but the number of dischargers under general permits has risen to around 3,600. This is an increase of about 400 percent. The overall backlog rate has dropped to less than 10 percent. During the same time, staff devoted to permitting activities has risen from around 80 to 120, or an increase of 50 percent. There are 23 staff people who administer general permits. Ecology's ability to provide permit coverage to an expanded universe of dischargers is highly dependent on the success of the general permit program.



Issues concerning general permits

General permits have been successful at bringing many additional dischargers under permit, but this success has not been without controversy. There are complaints that general permits over-regulate permit holders because they include requirements that do not apply equally to all dischargers. There are complaints that general permits under-regulate dischargers because they do not require enough controls to meet site-specific environmental issues. The tension between these two concerns could be resolved by increasing the application of site-specific considerations to general permits, but this would largely eliminate the benefits of the general permit approach, including the time savings that allows the efficient permitting of a large number of dischargers.

While general permits reduce the time it takes to issue permit coverage to a discharger, they do not reduce the time it takes to process reports, answer questions, conduct site inspections, provide technical assistance, or take enforcement actions. Individual attention to a specific discharger is the same whether that discharger has an individual permit or coverage under a general permit. Even small commitments of time add up quickly.

The Cost of Doing Business for 3,600 Permittees	
A 10-minute task such as receiving and filing paperwork:	600 hours or about ⅓ FTE
A two-hour task such as reviewing a report:	7,200 hours or about 4 FTEs
An eight-hour task such as a site inspection and follow-up report:	28,800 hours or about 16 FTEs

Inspections for most dischargers under a general permit will be infrequent. Ecology gives priority to investigating complaints and those sites where reports submitted to Ecology indicate there may be problems. Targeting the highest-risk sites provides a manageable approach to assuring environmental protection under general permits.

General permits are an important component in regulating the discharge of pollutants to the state's waters. While they do not fit every discharger perfectly, collectively they do provide broad environmental protection. They provide a practical approach to regulating a very large number of dischargers at a relatively reasonable cost.